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IDEAS AND IRONIES OF FOOD SCARCITY AND CONSUMPTION  
IN THE MORAL ECONOMY OF TUTA, CUBA<sup>\*1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The broad argument of this article is that national values embedded in what I call the Cuban national moral economy affect local valorisations of provisioning in Cuba and that such transmutations from the national to the local may be detected in some forms of language. I contend that local expressions of consumption and scarcity in Tuta, a town of about 10,000 inhabitants located forty kilometres southwest of Havana city, often stem from the value-laden ‘ideational repertoire’ (Wolf 1999: 8) of Cuban revolutionary nationalism. Terms such as ‘the [daily] fight [*lucha*] for provisions’, used in irony, are not only used to describe recurring challenges to household provisioning in post-1990 Cuba, but also to uphold, implicitly or explicitly, overarching values embedded in Cuban society. By drawing analytical distinctions, as well as assimilations, between linguistic expressions of national and local moral economies, I aim to show that ideas and ironies of consumption in Tuta are more profound than what may be ascertained from either nutritional data on the post-1990 economic crisis or outsider interpretations of the difficulties of daily Cuban life.

## I. Introduction

When, as one informant put it, the ‘Soviet tit went dry,’ the availability of affordable goods from state-owned stores, kiosks and markets plummeted in Tuta. The early 1990s ‘Special Period in Time of Peace’, as Fidel Castro called it, which had officially ended by the late 1990s, was certainly abnormally challenging according to many informants’ descriptions. Prices for goods skyrocketed, yet the average salary remained at 300 pesos

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the anonymity of my informants, I have disguised the name of the location where my fieldwork was conducted, as well as the names of individuals.

per month (around £9 in 2007). Some Tutaños recalled that lard or vegetable oil, essentials for Cuban cooking, cost 100 pesos per litre during this period (in 2007 a litre cost about 10 pesos). Another staple – rice – cost 45 pesos per pound (the 2007 price was 3.5 pesos per pound). Accordingly, talk of dietary deficiencies during these years was common during fieldwork, especially when informants were prompted on the subject: ‘People lacked calcium and lost their fingernails ... their hands showed signs.’ A person who had lost too much weight was identified as one who ‘is eating [electric] cable’.

After spending over fifteen months (2006-7) living with a family in Tuta, I found that scarcities of food in this Cuban town not only led to biological deprivation, but also to new kinds of social reproduction, as illustrated by the innovative ways in which Tutaños ‘invented’ new versions of desired items when the latter were hard to find or afford. For instance, almost all households I visited cooked rice – a Cuban staple – with twice as much water so that ‘it would grow’, giving the impression that one had more food on one’s plate. Others made up for the lack of meat by ‘boil[ing] grapefruit peels, fry[ing] them and call[ing] them steak!’ or by ‘cut[ting] up plantain peels, fry[ing] them and [eating] them as if they were *chicharrones* [fried pork skins, a favourite food for many Latin Americans]’. Still others claimed they were reduced to eating *arroz con fideo* (rice with thin soup noodles), apparently a very humiliating way to sustain oneself. A young woman joked, ‘We ate lizards!’ The implication of eating the inedible<sup>2</sup> sparked a memory in her mother’s mind: ‘Some people were caught and arrested for selling what they claimed to be pork steaks prepared with flour, but were actually fried pieces of *frazada de piso* (rag used for mopping floors)!’

At first glance, these narratives of post-1990s Cuba are consistent with findings from the Central Institute for Economic Planning (CIEM) of the United Nations Development Program, which reported a decrease in daily calorie and protein intake of

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, what is considered inedible is also culturally specific. In his study of famine in Tikopia, one of the Solomon Islands in Polynesia, Raymond Firth noted that, while people were willing to eat fibrous material such as tree bark, they still would not eat taboo foods such as some birds and bats (Firth 1959: 79). Indeed, more than a few social scientists have argued that in any society most people would rather die of starvation than eat foods they consider inedible or had obtained in an unacceptable way. Perhaps the first to make this point was Audrey Richards when she wrote: ‘Culture imposes restrictions [on diet] where nature would have left them free’ (Richards 1932: 8).

78% and 64% respectively (quoted in Suárez Salazar 2000: 292). Longer-term studies, such as that conducted by the Statistics Division of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, also indicate a higher percentage of ‘undernourishment’ during the early and mid-1990s than in other countries in the region (FAO-STAT 2006).<sup>3</sup>

Despite their value, however, such statistics reduce all food consumption to physiological criteria. Nutritional ‘facts’ presented in such studies are based on the assumption that estimates for daily per capita intake can be accurately assessed by averages, a quantitative method that completely disregards the prevailing situation of unequal access to food. Moreover, pre-defined, quantitative categories such as calorie and protein intake leave no room for qualitative accounts of scarcity and hunger, which are socio-cultural. It is the latter aspect of food scarcity which I wish to consider in this article.

Thirty years ago, Michel de Certeau (1984 [1980]: xviii-xix) reminded us that consumption – even within defined domains, such as nutritional intake – is also a kind of production, a means by which social actors (re)-create the physical and symbolic spaces in which they live. A few years earlier, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood made a similar point: ‘Consumption activity is the joint production, with fellow consumers, of a universe of values’ (Douglas and Isherwood 1978: 67). In the history of anthropology, strictly materialist perspectives on food intake (e.g. Harris 1986) have been contested by structuralist anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (e.g. 1968 [1963]), Mary Douglas (2002 [1966], 1975b) and Marshall Sahlins (1976), who stressed symbolic and cultural ways of separating the edible from the inedible. Sahlins, for instance, argued that, while animals such as horses and dogs may have nutritional qualities, people in the United States do not eat them because they are categorized as ‘friends’ (Sahlins 1976: 170-6). Nor do meat preferences correspond to economic value: though there is a larger supply of steak in the US, it is, according to Sahlins, still set at a higher price than tongue, which is scarcer (*ibid.*).

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<sup>3</sup> However, this study also suggests that Cuba’s overall health indicators have been much higher than others in the region during other periods.

Anthropologists such as Sahlins and others (Richards 1939; Firth 1959; Kahn 1986; Vaughan 1987; De Waal 1989, 1990; Sutton 2001) have used a symbolic framework to address cultural ideas of hunger and scarcity. In the analysis that follows, I continue along this line of thought. This theoretical framework is appropriate for the context of consumption in socialist Cuba since, as we shall see, some of the ways Tutaños dealt with food scarcities during my fieldwork period (2006-7) were linked to overarching symbols of the Cuban Revolution.

Before we come to the primary focus of the article, however, it is important to indicate that food scarcities are *not* new in revolutionary Cuba. As north American agricultural analyst Leon Mears asserted in the first years of the revolution: ‘Cubans have gone from being among the best fed people in Latin America to a diet below the area’s minimum nutritional standards’ (quoted in Forester and Handelman 1985: 174). Indeed, as I will argue below, the long-term ‘struggle’ for scarce goods in Cuba has become indicative of the very ways in which Cubans reproduce historical patterns of sociality:

For almost as long as the revolution has existed, Cuban sociality has been built around the practices of socialist consumption, from systems of queuing for goods, to sharing information about where items can be bought, to voicing hearty complaints about consumption with a dissatisfaction that could almost never be openly expressed about any other aspect of Cuban society (Pertierra 2007: 128)

Anthropologists who have tackled what John Davis refers to as the ‘sociology of crisis and disaster’ treat privation as a ‘normal’ aspect of everyday life (Davis 1992: 150, 152), countering ‘the assumption that, generally, contentment is the normal, culturally unmarked, state of affairs, while suffering is marked by its being unusual and demanding redressment’ (Hastrup 1993: 736). As one of the many groups of ‘food-insecure people’ (Pottier 1999: vii) in the world, Cubans must deal with crises such as food shortages on a periodic basis due not only to persistent sanctions by the United States, but also to inefficiencies in the state redistributive system, as well as the yearly onslaught of the hurricane season. Like many other peoples who live with scarcities, however, Tutaños

faced with food shortages try to maintain ‘normal’ lives in the face of crisis. And they often do so by upholding social moralities and cognitions. As Raymond Firth, perhaps the first anthropologist to study crisis and disaster, argued, the physical realities of famine lead individuals to re-work pre-existing cultural categories; it is rare that they cause Malthusian disasters involving mass deaths (Firth 1959: 54-105):

Where lowering of the food supply takes place fairly rapidly, the strains on the social system are not simply nutritional – belly-gnawing; they depend on recognitions, sentiments, moral evaluations and symbols of social relations. They involve emotional attitudes to the hunger of wife, children and kinsfolk, moral attitudes towards giving food to starving neighbours; social attitudes to the presentation of food as a symbol of social status and social relationships. (ibid.: 52)

Local conceptualizations of food scarcities in Tuta, which near official norms in certain contexts and depart from them in others, structure how people deal with crisis on an everyday level. Like Alex De Waal in the context of famine in Darfur (1989, 1990), I will attempt to show for Tutaño society how outside interpretations of economic crisis are often at odds with insider views of scarcity. To do so, I will explain the way the idea of the national ‘Fight or Struggle (*la Lucha*)’ has been used by local people in Tuta, who have changed it to ‘the daily fight (*lucha*) for provisions’.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as I will argue, while outsiders<sup>5</sup> may regard statements such as ‘the fight for provisions’ and ironic contrasts between daily realities and revolutionary ideals as direct attacks upon the foundations of Cuban socialism, I will show how such communicative tactics often reflect efforts to

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<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I make an analytical distinction between the capitalised version of *Lucha*, which refers to the national moral economy, and the lower-case *lucha*, which I use with reference to the local moral economy. I follow this distinction also in translating the word into English.

<sup>5</sup> It is clear that I am positioning myself, at least in part, as an insider. This stance can only be justified by the fact that I was allowed to stay in Cuba as the ‘family member’ of a particular Cuban family, who created a fictitious familial relationship to ensure that the Cuban authorities would provide me with a *visa familiar* (family visa) rather than a *visa turistica* (tourist visa). I was thus able to see and experience the ‘real’ Cuba as opposed to the typical encounters that tourists (and even academic visitors) have with Cubans. The latter must pay to stay in *casas particulares* (rooms rented out to tourists by Cubans who pay the government a hefty fee) or hotels, and so may only meet Cubans who can afford to rent them rooms, *jineteros* (street hustlers) or officials.

balance demoralizing realities on the one hand with moral norms to continue the national ‘Struggle’ of the Cuban revolution on the other.

## II. *La Lucha* and Cuban irony

According to some anthropologists, broaching the topic of food in (post)socialist contexts is a very good way to initiate discussions that may lead to the political (see Watson and Caldwell 2005 on Russia; Pertierra 2007: 82 on Cuba; Watson n.d. on China). The anthropologist’s intentions aside, food and food provisioning are probably the most talked about subjects in Cuba, apart, perhaps, from health. Indeed, Anna Cristina Pertierra has recently argued that in Cuba ‘*everybody* complains about shortages and high prices...and nobody can be blamed for doing so. ...although Cuba is a society in which some things can’t be spoken about, consumption is not one of those things’ (Pertierra 2007: 45, emphasis in the original).

Though women are most often the cooks in the family, men, women and children alike must engage in the ‘fight for provisions’. When greeting another on the street, it is common to hear the response: ‘*Estoy en la lucha...de provisiones* (I am [engaged] in the fight/struggle for provisions)’ or just ‘*Estoy en la lucha* (I am in the fight/struggle)’. Indeed, when I arbitrarily asked one of my primary informants, Claudia, what she thought to be the three most important things in Cuba, she responded, with incremental emphasis: ‘1. food, 2. Food and 3. FOOD!’ Laughing, she added that each corresponds to ‘breakfast, lunch and dinner’.

With hindsight, I realized that Claudia’s comment drew on a common joke in Cuba, to which we shall soon return. Suffice it to note here that such words like *lucha* have more than one signified: they not only indicate solidarity with the imagined Cuban national community in accordance with the political goal of ‘Fighting’ for a utopian future and against imperialism, but, because they incorporate the state’s discourse, they are also politically neutral ways of expressing exasperation with the daily difficulties involved in provisioning for the household. Words like *luchar*, ‘to fight’ or ‘struggle’,

work as buffers between individual frustrations with the way everyday life in Cuba *is* and moral ideals about how it *ought* to be. The unisemic reference to *lucha*, the normative framework that exists above individual experience, may become polysemic in the act of utterance, in the individual performance: ‘To describe one’s life as a struggle in the Special Period is to make a wry commentary upon the transition that many citizens have made from struggling *for* Cuban socialism to struggling *with* Cuban socialism’ (Pertierra 2007: 42).

A comparable use of language has been noted in other (post)socialist contexts, where ‘economies of shortage’ (Kornai 1980) create the need for similar social manoeuvring. Olga Shevchenko, for example, explains the dual purpose of ‘consumption narratives’ in the post-Soviet Russian context:

[C]onsumers use [consumption narratives] to voice their discontent (as when they bemoan the constraints and difficulties of being a consumer in both the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ Russian economy), but also to manage their predicament by devising a narrative framework in which the two can co-exist and be invested with value and meaning. In other words, *articulations* of crisis function simultaneously as *instruments* through which this crisis is managed and navigated. (Shevchenko 2002: 854)

Contrary to Shevchenko’s example of post-Soviet Russia, however, where consumption narratives are used primarily to assuage the consumers’ predicament, the dual purpose of signs in Cuba is not only a means by which an individual’s discontent may be disguised and/or managed. Indeed, language performances in Cuba such as jokes serve *both* as outlets for subversion,<sup>6</sup> *and* as ways to reconcile the state’s inability to secure general welfare with collective values that rest above individual experience. Thus while the word *lucha* may have two different meanings – one corresponding to the ‘is’ and the other to

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<sup>6</sup> Like Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (1989), I prefer to use the term ‘subversion’ rather than ‘resistance’. As in Yang’s China, the ‘oppositional economy’ in 2006-7 Cuba largely existed ‘in itself rather than for itself’ (Yang 1989: 51).



the ‘ought’ – we must consider the way this distinction may be complicated in actual performance, that is, in localized contexts of Cuban socialism.

Pertierra argues that, for some of her informants, the contradiction between revolutionary values and everyday difficulties in provisioning for the household was not often made explicit. In reference to one woman’s account, Pertierra notes:

[She]...never seemed uncomfortable about distinguishing between her general pride in being ‘a Cuban woman’, supporting the revolution and its achievements, and yet criticizing the shortcomings of the Special Period that she observed had obliged her to struggle to provide good food for the household and to rebuild the house with years of economic sacrifice. (Pertierra 2007: 25)

Likewise, during fieldwork I was surprised to find that even people considered to be closely allied to the revolution – the *jefes* (state managers) of state enterprises, for example – used language that seemed at first quite anti-revolutionary. One of my informants, Ricardo, a *jefe* of a state dairy farm and general secretary of his Communist Party ‘work nucleus’, bewildered me in such a way. When I asked him a simple question: ‘What was the biggest hurricane before Ivan?’, remembering the destruction this tempest had caused, which postponed my second visit to Cuba in 2004, he responded: ‘The hurricane of 1959! We lost all our meat, we lost all our crops, the electricity went out, and it hasn’t been the same since!’ At this, friends and family sitting on the veranda of his sister-in-law’s home burst into laughter and I joined in, though slightly confused. The year marking the success of the revolution was referred to as a moment of destruction rather than its usual depiction by locals and in official contexts as ‘the triumph’.

On another occasion, whilst watching the title sequence of the daily *Noticiero Nacional de la Televisión Cubana* (National News of Cuban Television, abbreviated to NTV in the opening sequence), a former communist leader, Miguel, asked me whether I knew what ‘NTV’ meant. He did so with a twinkle in his eye. I told him the right answer and he contradicted me, ‘No! It does not mean *Noticiero Nacional de la Televisión Cubana*, it means *No Tenemos Viandas* (we have no tubers/root vegetables)!’ As tubers and root

vegetables are mainstays in the Cuban diet, this joke seemed to be a direct attack on the state's distribution system.

Like the analysis of all linguistic acts, however, that of humour should not start from the assumption that language is a weapon to be used as an outcry against the power structure. Indeed, as Dow and Lixfeld argue, 'the standard political labels of "totalitarian" or "democratic" not only fail to adequately identify the defining conditions for political humour, but obscure the relationship between genre and context' (cited by Stein 1989: 90). Jokes of a political nature must be analyzed both within the context in which the joke is uttered and in relation to the particular language used by the speaker. In context, jokes may draw on continuity as well as critique.

As my fieldwork in Cuba progressed, I was to find that jokes like Ricardo's and Miguel's are very common in domestic settings. Some areas of the house, especially those furthest from the 'ears' of the street, are 'off-stage' contexts which James Scott regards as places for 'infra-politics...the obtrusive realm of political struggle' (Scott 2005 [1997]: 311). The Cuban phrase heard very often in Tuta: '*Candidad de la calle, obscuridad de la casa* (openness from the [view of the] street, obscurity from the [view of the] house)' probably means that one must be forthright about one's revolutionary conviction when one is in public but that this may become muddled in domestic settings. Such 'hidden transcripts' (ibid.: 314) play a significant role in social relations within what I call the domestic sphere, which encompasses both the physical household *and* unseen areas in town that may become important in securing household provisioning. Food scarcities are a daily concern for Tutaños, and as already noted it is common to hear talk of getting foodstuffs on the street in revolutionary language, e.g. engaging in 'the fight for provisioning'. But when this talk of scarcities enters the domestic sphere, it often becomes what some Habaneros have called a *tragicomedia* ('tragi-comedy'; Tanuma 2007: 50).

I have already emphasized, however, that performances heard in the domestic sphere, such as Ricardo's joke about the 1959 'hurricane', are more complicated than they seem to outsiders. They are not just homogenous acts of resistance against the power structure, as suggested by Scott's idea of household 'infra-politics' (Scott 2005 [1997]:

311). Actually, as I will try to demonstrate below, Cuban irony may *also* be a way in which Tutaños identify with that very structure.

Using the term ‘co-evality’ (borrowed from Fabian 2002 [1983]), Chris Gregory rejects strict dichotomies between subaltern and dominant cognitions (Gregory 1996: 204; 1997: 245). In a similar fashion, when analysing irony and other performative signs, one must not rely too much on the resisters/exploiters binary.

### III. Insider and outsider ironies

Sachiko Tanuma, a Japanese anthropologist who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Havana in 2003-04, has recently attempted to understand Cuban irony (2007). Tanuma gauged the limits of Cuban humour by reading to Joanna, a Cuban sociologist, an ethnography that Tanuma claims to be a misrepresentation of the particularly Cuban way of using irony.<sup>7</sup> While Joanna first enjoyed the ethnographic detail of women engaging in ‘the fight’, stating: ‘I really sympathize with the words of those women. I didn’t know there were so many of them who thought a lot like me’ (Tanuma 2007: 50), she changed her mind when she heard the end, which states: ‘Cuban women certainly live in a situation...of profound failure to meet their expectations’ (ibid., cited from Holgado Fernández 2000: 334). Indeed, as Tanuma notes, at the conclusion of the ethnography the Cuban woman made ‘a disgusted face, looked down, shook her head, and said in a determined voice, “*No me gusta* (I don’t like it)”’ (Tanuma 2007: 50). According to Tanuma’s account, though outsiders may associate language that targets the difficulties of the revolution (e.g. *la lucha*) with an unmitigated disapproval of revolutionary values, insiders do not. Indeed, this example shows that such a connection may breed disapproval or moral qualms.

Sidney Mintz apparently arrived at a similar conclusion in criticizing another ethnographic account which centred on the ineffectiveness of the Cuban state’s distribution system, instead of explaining how the state’s failure to eradicate scarcities is

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<sup>7</sup> The ethnography, *¡No es fácil! Mujeres cubanas y la crisis revolucionaria* (*It’s not easy! Cuban women and the crisis of the revolution*; 2000), is by the Spanish anthropologist Isabel Holgado Fernández.

understood by the people who actually have to live with them.<sup>8</sup> When Tanuma met with Mintz in Japan, the latter related what he claimed to be a classic Cuban joke. It is very likely that this is the full version of Claudia's humorous comment about the 'three most important things in Cuba' mentioned at the beginning of this section, and for this reason it will be the central example in my analysis. 'What are the three successes of the Cuban Revolution? – medicine, education and athletics. What are the three failures of the Cuban Revolution? – breakfast, lunch and dinner!' Tanuma compares the use of irony in her encounter with Mintz to that in her interview with Joanna:

Of course, Mintz does know that food distribution in Cuba is far from perfect. He and Joanna share a sense of humor [*sic*] and make similarly ironical jokes. So why is it that they 'dislike' these ethnographic writings that are based on long-term fieldwork that also describe the current situation in Cuba in an ironical voice? ... [It is because] such writings...often reduc[e] the irony of the formerly committed insider to the ironic narrative of the observing outsider. (Tanuma 2007: 51)

Tanuma distinguishes between these two kinds of ironies using an analogy with a literary technique first used by writers of Greek tragedy:

The ironic observing outsider comments sarcastically on the incongruity between what is expected and what actually occurs. This irony is similar to 'dramatic irony' – 'a literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions are clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character' (*New Oxford Dictionary*, S.V. 'Dramatic Irony'). Just as the audience knows better than a character on the stage, observing outsiders know better than insiders. (ibid.: 51-2)

The argument is convincing, especially as Tanuma does not ignore the relationship between genre and context that others have criticized in analyses of political humour (Stein 1989: 90). But to demonstrate *why* insider irony is not the same as outsider irony, it

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<sup>8</sup> In writing of her meeting with Mintz, Tanuma does not provide the author or title of this ethnography.

is of prime importance to show *how* Cuban jokes are not just straightforward displays of resistance used to attack the state's failure to ameliorate food shortages. Rather than focusing entirely on contrasting perspectives of insiders and outsiders as Tanuma does, I would like instead to concentrate on another dualism that occurs exclusively within the insider arena of language, one that is related to cultural notions of scarcity within Tutaño society.

In Tuta, as in all societies, every person must find a balance between the given structure of society and their particular version of it, between, for example, individualism and collectivism. The jokes given above, especially the 'three successes and three failures' joke, sit on the fulcrum between these two orders, though different interpretations weigh one side down more than the other. In Tanuma's account, the outsider's perspective weighs on the individualistic side – personal needs and desires for food security – while for Cuban insiders the scale teeters towards the collectivist side of social needs and values. But jokes are more complicated than this. While both sides are important, the individualist side must carry more weight for the joke to be effective. This does not mean, however, that the collectivist side is thrust completely into the air. Mary Douglas writes about jokes as 'total social situations' which

brin[g] into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first. ...this joke pattern...needs two elements, the juxtaposition of a control against that which is controlled, the juxtaposition being such that the latter triumphs. ...a successful subversion of one form by another completes or ends the joke, for it changes the balance of power. [...] The joke merely affords the opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity. [...] It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general. ...it is an image of the levelling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones. (Douglas 1975a: 96-8)

By inverting the dominant and subordinate forms, the 'successes and failures' joke works to empower Tutaños who engage in the daily 'struggle' for provisions. The subordinate

form is represented by the weaknesses of the revolution, all of which relate to food scarcity, while the dominant form of Claudia's and Mintz's joke is what is considered revolutionary: exalting the successes of the revolution – medicine, education and athletics.

As implied by Douglas's description of jokes cited above, and as Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940, 1949) argued for joking relations between affines among the Dogon of Mali, witticisms that work to reverse the order of society usually do not overturn the entire social structure. While events may lead to changes in an individual's relation to society, affectionate portraits of failure that reference such changes take place within a *shared* moral universe. As elsewhere, so for jokes in Cuba, 'The person who does the mocking lives in the same world as the mocked' (Tanuma 2007: 47).

Rituals such as speeches on commemorative days work to continuously remind individuals in society not only of its dominant structure, but also of its primary values and morals, its reason for being. Douglas contrasts such rites with 'ritual pollution', or direct attacks on the value system which cause 'abomination...which contradic[t] the basic categories of experience and in so doing threate[n] both *the order of reason* and the order of society' (Douglas 1975a: 106; my emphasis). As Douglas asserts, 'ritual pollution' is not the same as joking; the latter is instead a

temporary suspension of the social structure, or rather...a little disturbance in which the particular structuring of society becomes less relevant than another. ...*the strength of its attack is entirely restricted by the consensus on which it depends for recognition.* (ibid.; my emphasis)

A short diversion from the topic of Cuban irony is necessary to examine this 'consensus' in the present context: the central revolutionary values in Cuba.

#### **IV. The national moral economy**

In the national moral economy of Cuba, revolutionary persons are those who value social justice over individual wealth. Social justice is treated as a revolutionary *process*, a long, collective ‘Struggle (*Lucha*)’ against economic imperialism and exploitation, a persistent claim that ‘*un futuro mejor es posible* (a better future is possible)’. But the revolutionary process through which a prosperous social whole is created may also require that individuals in Cuba experience material deprivation, at least until the future date of abundance occurs. This need to relinquish individual desires for the collective good was highlighted in Castro’s lengthy address on 6 April 1961 to the Constitutional Committee for the Defence of the Revolution of the Construction Workers, which could have been made during my period of fieldwork by any high official:

[G]entlemen, enemies of the revolution, we are ready to deprive ourselves around here. [...] This we have done, and the future we are building for our people, cost us what it costs, whatever the deprivation, we will now pursue, the people know how, they have dignity! ...the workers cannot be scared off with deprivation, this revolution has occurred precisely because of all the deprivations that workers underwent, all the humiliation to which the poor people were subjected! [...] You do not scare them with poverty and deprivation, nor with sacrifice, because they know that such deprivation and sacrifice will benefit them tomorrow...deprivation today will be plenty tomorrow! Let the sacrifice of today’s happiness be with us tomorrow, when it bears fruit!

Long live the Revolution! Homeland or Death! We shall overcome! (Castro 1999 [1961])

The spirit of self-sacrifice is inseparable from what Cuban sociologist Luis Suárez Salazar refers to as the *heroismo cotidiano* (‘daily heroism’; Suárez Salazar 2000: 292) of all Cubans engaged in the ‘fight for provisions’ and other daily difficulties. This value of ‘resisting’ difficult conditions is not only endorsed by Fidel and the Cuban government, but is also present at the local level. It is a primary element not only of Cuban national identity but also of local identity formation. For instance, when I told Tutaños that I travelled in Cuba by lorry (the least expensive and most uncomfortable way to travel) rather than by car (the most expensive way to travel), many exclaimed ‘You *are* Cuban!’

They assumed that, as a ‘rich’ foreigner, I would have chosen to travel in luxury rather than experience the frustrations and discomfort associated with the unreliable and crowded public transport system.

On another occasion, while I was conducting research for the Agrarian University of Havana in 2004-5, I chose to eat a nearly tasteless peso pizza for lunch with fellow Cuban students and professors, rather than dine at the special cafeteria reserved *exclusively* for foreign students, where more valued foods were served.<sup>9</sup> Upon taking my first bite, I looked up and saw that nearly all the Cuban students and professors standing in the long line to enter the standard Cuban cafeteria were staring at me. When I inquired about their strange attention, a friend told me, ‘They are surprised to see a foreigner eating low-quality pizza when you could have had something better at the cafeteria for foreigners. [...] You really must be Cuban!’

From the very beginning of the revolution to the present, the official way to win the ‘war of the people’, the battle against imperialism symbolised most powerfully by US sanctions, is to ‘resist’ (material desires) and to ‘Fight’. Indeed, one cannot travel anywhere in Cuba without seeing billboards that contain one or more of these concepts. Such ideas are linked to a pervasive optimism underlying the teleological idea that individual efforts today will reap collective rewards tomorrow. As Fidel has repeatedly said, ‘*Luchar por una utopía es, en parte construirla* (To fight for a utopia is, in part, to construct it’; quoted by Suárez Salazar 2000: 363). Local idioms I heard in Tuta on a daily basis are counterparts to Fidel’s optimism: i.e. ‘*Mañana sera mejor* (Tomorrow will be better)’; ‘*Un mundo mejor es posible* (A better world is possible)’; ‘*No hay mal que por bien no venga* (Bad only happens for good’; my translations).

In the first years of the Revolution, Castro made his and the revolutionary leadership’s direct faith in the persistence of the Cuban population very clear. When Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir visited Fidel in 1959, they were aware that the affiliation between the revolutionary leadership and the *campesinos* (peasants) was

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, during my five-month stay in an academic visitors’ residence, nearly every meal contained meat, a highly-valued food item.



unique. During their tour of Havana Province, Sartre made an inquiry about this relationship to the *comandante* himself:

Sartre: Yesterday and today we've seen the intense relationship that you have with your people, but how do you yourself see this relationship?

Fidel: It is a mutual relationship. They influence us and we influence them. We visit a cooperative, we encourage the increase in production, they talk to us. This [encouragement] provokes in them a reaction. When I come back to visit them again, I see what they have done, I observe how much they have improved, this stimulates me, influences me.

Sartre observes that in the conversations between Fidel and the *campesinos* there is never any flattery, that Fidel always criticizes them. Fidel responds that they [the *campesinos*] are prepared to receive constructive criticism:

Fidel: The biggest lesson that one can take from this revolution is that the people have always been underestimated .... People that walk [the world] like this, without schools, without preparation, *it seems that they are being educated by the work that they are doing*. (Otero 1960: 131-2; my emphasis and translations)

The revolutionary process, a cultural form embedded in the national moral economy of Cuba, is characterized by a symbiotic relationship between workers and the revolutionary government (especially Fidel). According to this line of thought, working hard, not losing faith and being persistent are central revolutionary values for all Cuban people, which *will* lead to both material and moral rewards. With regard to the latter, many informants have proudly shown me certificates of merit from their workplaces, the highest being the title of *maestro de oficios* ('Master of Office'). Moreover, contrary to the claim that this kind of revolutionary devotion is on the wane, at least in the period 2006-7 many Cubans of the younger generation expressed to me the satisfaction they acquired from working hard at their jobs, whether provided by the state or private. Alfredo, for example, said he never tells people he is tired even if he has worked his two

jobs for forty-eight hours with little (if any) rest. When I asked why I rarely hear him complain about being tired or say he does not want to do something required of him, Alfredo simply responded that to say these things would give the impression that he is 'afraid of work', which he is not.

Perhaps one of the best compliments one can give another person in Tuta is to describe them as a '*luchador/a* (fighter)'. I often heard this expression used in praise, not specifically of a person's revolutionary merits, but rather for being a 'good' person overall. Likewise, the ability to 'resist' has become a revolutionary value that is inseparable from working hard. Quite a few of my informants would most likely still agree with a man from Mayarí (eastern Cuba) who was interviewed by a Cuban-American sociologist in the early sixties: 'Fidel never lied to us about that. He said there would be times when there would not be enough and times when we would have all we want. Fidel never lied' (Yglesias 1968: 106). Indeed, the ability to 'resist' hard times was a quality Castro identified with the Cuban people from the very beginning. Just a week after the 'triumph', Castro conceded to a crowd of eager Habaneros:

I think that this is a decisive moment of our history: the tyranny has been overthrown.

Our happiness is immense. But yet, there still remains much to be done. We cannot fool ourselves, thinking of a future when everything will be easy; maybe in the future everything will be even more difficult. (Castro 2004 [1959]; my translation)

Yet while 'good' people are considered *luchadores* both on the street and inside the house, this does not mean that Tutaños do not recognize how hard their life is. In fact, perhaps the most common expression I heard on a daily basis was '*no es fácil*' (it is not easy), as other anthropologists have noted for the Cuban context (e.g. Holgado Fernández 2000). Most Tutaños (especially women) describe their lives as 'agitated', as there is always stress involved in procuring the next family meal, but they make such statements safely behind closed doors and window shutters. Furthermore, the need (and desire) to acquire commodities does not always coincide with the obligation to 'resist'. For instance, despite his tremendous work effort, Alfredo (mentioned above) claimed he

constantly faced both political and economic ‘blocks’ when getting food and other needed or desired items.<sup>10</sup> Many other Tutaños found it difficult to deal with government monopolies on consumer goods such as cars made after 1959 and foods of higher quality, especially when they saw ‘functionaries driving Audis and eating the best cuisine’. It seems that all Cubans are aware (even government officials)<sup>11</sup> of the contradiction between the moral drive to ‘resist’ and frustrations with the way the system is working on the ground. Yet the articulation by Tutaños of the positive and negative aspects of the revolution is cultural rather than economically rational. While most Tutaños complain about present scarcities (or, perhaps more frequently during the 2006-7 period, the inability to afford items that *are* available), the same people use revolutionary discourse in their valorisations of people who deal best with the situation. Daily grumbling about life is how many Tutaños identify themselves as ‘fighters’; talking about difficulties often means one is continuing to ‘resist’.

Being a ‘fighter’ in the local context does not always mean that one follows officially permitted rules, however. Some anthropologists of Cuba (Berg 2004: 48; Roland 2006: 156) have even argued that people use the term ‘the fight’ to describe illegal activity:

The popularly invoked term *lucha* – which can take either the noun or verb form of ‘struggle’ or ‘fight’ – encompasses [many] means of surviving in the Special Period. [...] The irony in the everyday usage of the term...is that it often involves either minor or major illegalities within the revolution’s moralistic system.... (Roland *ibid.*)

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<sup>10</sup> Descriptions of obstacles to provisioning in socialist society – for example, the need to rely on ‘friends’ rather than simply buying items at stores or hiring people for services – are by no means unique to Cuba. Consider one steel factory manager in Hungary during the Soviet era: ‘Here, it’s not enough to work hard at several jobs. One has to go through friends to get things done; one can’t simply make a phone call, but must do errands in person; it’s not possible to trust a professional to take care of house-building or repairs, you have to do it yourself; if you come home at night tired, you can’t go out to eat somewhere but have to cook’ (Fehérváry 2002: 374).

<sup>11</sup> The official ‘line’ deals with contradictions by continuing to publicize ‘auto-critiques’. The best known example of this is ‘Castro’s apology’ of 1970 after he decided to shift from the ten-million-ton sugar drive to opening up the economy along Soviet lines. Yet while mistakes and shortcomings are publicly admitted on a regular basis, they are not at odds with the predominant idea of the dialectical materialist road to progress, whereby society must face contradictions in order to reach a higher stage.

One should use caution, however, when making parallel associations between moral and juridical rules. As Max Gluckman (1965 [1955]) argued for the Lozi of Northern Rhodesia, so in all societies, there *is* a difference between legal rights based on laws enforced in the courts on the one hand, and moral rights or ‘the pressure of public opinion, individual conscience and social reciprocity’ on the other (Fortes 1969: 237). As used in the local moral economy, the term *lucha* may incorporate both legal and illegal activity; I have emphasized, however, that it is still very much related to overarching values embedded in the national moral economy. Legal rules may be broken in everyday life, but there is a moral difference in the local economy between acceptable and unacceptable illegal activity, a distinction which stems from the wider cultural system (for a more in-depth analysis of the issue of legality and morality in Cuba, see Wilson 2009: Chapter 3).

As with illegal acts of provisioning, grievances about present-day challenges for the household economy are not merely expressions of resistance to overarching values in Cuban society. It is in this light – one that incorporates *both* the difficulties and contradictions of everyday material realities *and* the historical values and symbols embedded in Cuban society – that Cuban irony and other linguistic performances should be analysed. Thus while we have seen above that the dominant and subordinate forms must oppose each other in the ‘successes and failures’ joke (‘the three successes’ vs. ‘the three failures’ of the revolution), the contradiction that results is not ‘axiomatic’ (Gregory 1997: 9); it is not a stark contrast between pro-revolutionary or anti-revolutionary, collectivism and individualism, the state and the house (ibid.: 12-14). As opposed to an axiomatic contradiction, the ‘successes and failures’ joke is more like what Gregory (ibid.: 10-11) calls a ‘commonplace contradiction’, one that reflects a particular balance between two or more viewpoints, a ‘coexistence of rival cognitions’ (ibid.). Indeed, many people who use irony in Cuba are *both* critical of the present state of affairs *and* sympathetic to revolutionary goals, as illustrated by Tanuma’s conclusions:

While the jokes told by my friends may sound critical of and sarcastic toward the political leaders and the state, most of [my friends] had been faithful revolutionaries until the

beginning of the Special Period. [...] Their shared sentiment then was not complete resentment toward the revolutionary ideas and institutions, but sad disillusion toward the present situation. What makes their *cuentos*<sup>12</sup> and jocular comments ironic is *their half-belief in and adoration of the revolutionary figures and...mythical stories that they are mocking*. (Tanuma 2007: 57; my emphasis)

Arguably, there are very few people in Tuta who think positively about the term ‘counter-revolutionary’, no matter how many jokes or complaints about food scarcity are told. And, as we have seen, the idea of engaging in ‘the fight for provisions’ is related to being revolutionary (even if this means breaking legal rules). Tutaños who have dealt with scarcities during the revolution do so, in varying degrees, to continue working towards the goals of the revolution. Their ‘struggle’ for provisions *is* collective and is buttressed by a long-term view of a better future stemming from the national moral economy. As Émile Durkheim indicated, ‘The ideal society is an aspect of real society, myth *is* history for those who recreate it’ (cited in Sahlins 1976: 106-13).

## V. Conclusion

The way Tutaños deal with contradictions between the normative and the actual is tied to specific cultural forms that have evolved in Cuba over time. Indeed, despite the variations in the ways individuals act in the everyday ‘rituals’ (James 2003: 7) of provisioning and consumption, social institutions – which are often created by locals themselves, such as humour and etiquette – provide moral continuity and uphold the normative order. As Firth wrote of Tikopia, so for Cuba, challenges to the order wrought by scarcity have not undermined moral continuities that determine how people shift on and off the normative path. Ceremonial meetings and transactions, institutions such as structured hierarchy, and

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<sup>12</sup> Tanuma found three definitions of the word *cuento* during her fieldwork, which are also interesting for the present context: 1. story, 2. joke and 3. lie (Tanuma 2007: 54).

even tacit rules such as etiquette all work to ensure ‘the survival of...social life in its systematic form’ (Firth 1959: 105).

‘Channels of communication’ (Douglas 1975a: 4), such as irony, allow Tutaños to incorporate present-day challenges and contradictions in Cuba into established classifications that draw on moral ideas about the present and future of revolutionary society. As Marcel Mauss and his uncle Émile Durkheim stressed, such classifications are as related to emotive values associated with collective memories as they are a product of individual rationalities (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]: 86-7, cited by Needham in his introduction, 1963: xxii-xxiii). Official and local valorisations co-exist, and people constantly switch from one to another (Gregory 1996: 204; 1997: 245). Between two ends of the spectrum – on the one hand following the rules, on the other breaking them – exists a grey area instituted by the people themselves. Indeed, at the everyday level of household reproduction, Tutaños must be *bricoleurs*, creating new stuff out of given cultural material.

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